

Skinflick

Posthuman Gender in Jonathan Demme's *The Silence of the Lambs*

JUDITH HALBERSTAM

THE STATEMENT "IDENTITY IS ONLY SKIN DEEP" sums up Judith Halberstam's analysis of Jonathan Demme's controversial film, *The Silence of the Lambs*. She addresses late-twentieth-century angst over body manipulation and modification, and looks beyond available categories of gendered personhood and sexed embodiment to develop a new, potentially post-human, construct of the self.

In her discussion of the psychopathic killer "Buffalo Bill," Halberstam deftly circumvents then-current criticisms of queer activists who dismissed Demme's film as a "negative representation" of gay issues. Buffalo Bill is neither homosexual nor transsexual, Halberstam contends, despite his wish to be contained within a woman's skin. Rather, he is an emblem of the discomfort we all feel with our bodies in postmodern societies. The monstrosity he represents is not one that is readily reduced to and contained within his individual body, but is instead the effect of a social process—a set of banal, impersonally menacing, bureaucratic operations that constantly work on and transform all of our bodies. Figures like Buffalo Bill, and like the figure of the transsexual, speak to broader concerns with the meaning of embodiment in a culture obsessed with dieting, working out, tattooing, piercing, or otherwise modifying our flesh.

Halberstam has made many powerful contributions to transgender studies, queer theory, and feminism—most notably her widely adopted turn-of-phrase, "female masculinity." Her work has been especially influential because it provides a common ground upon which a broader intellectual community can better appreciate the relevance of specific issues emerging within transgender scholarship, while simultaneously helping transgender scholars contextualize their own work within broader currents and trends in contemporary critical inquiry.

The monster, as we know it, died in 1963 when Hannah Arendt published her "Report on the Banality of Evil" entitled *Eichmann in Jerusalem*. Adolf Eichmann, as the representative of a system of unspeakable horror, stood trial for "Crimes Committed Against Humanity." Arendt refused, in her report, to grant the power of horror to the ordinary looking man who stood trial. While the press commented on the monster who hides behind the banal appearance, Arendt turned the equation around and recognized the banality of a monstrosity that functions as a bureaucracy. She writes:

[The prosecutor] wanted to try the most abnormal monster the world had ever seen . . . [The Judges] knew, of course, that it would have been very comforting indeed to believe that Eichmann was a monster, even though if he had been Israel's case against him would have collapsed. . . . The trouble with Eichmann was

rather than in the fact that we have gone "beyond" them. Narratives of the end of history are, I have suggested, in this sense symptomatic of the very historicity they seek to disavow.

To put it another way, the signifier "history" has more than one referent. Often, as in the case of Baudrillard and Jameson, the proliferation of diverse histories in our own era is acknowledged only in order to be negated. It is only because we no longer have access to a true history, the argument runs, that we are increasingly surrounded by impoverished simulacra of the historical. Quite apart from the epistemological problems posed by such sweeping distinctions between authentic and inauthentic forms of representation, this nostalgic narrative works to erase the power-laden logics of previous histories, including, I would insist, their problematic relationship to women and questions of gender. In renouncing this unilinear trajectory from the presence to the absence of history, we leave ourselves free to ask other kinds of questions. How do current apprehensions of historical time either appropriate, transform, or contest those of earlier eras? To what extent do these diverse apprehensions bear witness to conflicting visions of the politics of history on the part of particular cultural groups? How can we remain attentive to disjuncture and nonsynchrony in the experience of temporality while simultaneously acknowledging systematic connections and relations among discrete cultural practices? From such a standpoint, the thesis of the end of history merely repeats rather than subverts the ongoing myth of a universal history.

NOTES

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1. Jean Baudrillard, *The Transparency of Evil* (New York, 1993), pp. 20–21; hereafter cited in text as *TE*.
2. Cited in Will L. McLendon, "Rachilde: Fin-de-Siècle Perspectives on Perversity," in *Modernity and Revolution in Late Nineteenth-Century France*, ed. Barbara T. Cooper and Mary Donaldson-Evans (Newark, Del., 1992), pp. 52–61.
3. Jean Baudrillard, *Cool Memories* (London, 1990), p. 149.
4. Donna Haraway, "A Manifesto for Cyborgs: Science, Technology and Socialist Feminism in the 1980s," in *Feminism/Postmodernism*, ed. Linda Nicholson (London, 1990), p. 191; hereafter cited in text.
5. Sandy Stone, "The Empire Strikes Back: A Posttranssexual Manifesto," in *Body Guards: The Cultural Politics of Gender Ambiguity*, ed. Julia Epstein and Kristina Straub (New York, 1991), p. 294. I am grateful to Andrew Parker for providing me with a copy of this text.
6. Arthur Kroker and Marilouise Kroker, *Body Invaders: Panic Sex in America* (New York, 1987) and *The Last Sex* (New York, 1993).
7. Arthur and Marilouise Kroker, "Scenes from the Last Sex: Feminism and Outlaw Bodies," in *The Last Sex*, pp. 18–19.
8. Gianni Vattimo, *The End of Modernity: Nihilism and Hermeneutics in a Postmodern Culture* (Baltimore, 1988).
9. See Gianni Vattimo, "The End of (Hi)story," in *Zeitgeist in Babel: The Postmodernist Controversy*, ed. Ingeborg Hoesterey (Bloomington, Ind., 1991), pp. 132–41.
10. See Rita Felski, *The Gender of Modernity* (Cambridge, Mass., 1995), ch. 6.
11. M. J. Devaney, "Since at Least Plato' and Other Postmodernist Myths," unpublished doctoral dissertation, University of Virginia, 1994.
12. Susan Bordo also makes this point. See her "Feminism, Postmodernism and Gender-Scepticism," in *Feminism/Postmodernism*, pp. 133–56.
13. Gianni Vattimo, *The Transparent Society* (Baltimore, 1992), p. 3.
14. Judith Roof, "Lesbians and Lyotard," in *The Lesbian Postmodern*, ed. Laura Doan (New York, 1994), p. 59.
15. Arjun Appadurai, "Disjuncture and Difference in the Global Cultural Economy," in *The Phantom Public Sphere*, ed. Bruce Robbins (Minneapolis, 1993), pp. 269–95.
16. Bordo, "Feminism, Postmodernism and Gender-Scepticism," pp. 144–45; Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick and Michael Moon, "Divinity: a Dossier, a Performance Piece, a Little Understood Emotion," in Eve Sedgwick, *Tendencies* (Durham, N.C., 1993), pp. 219–24.

precisely that so many were like him, and that the many were neither perverted nor sadistic, that they were, and still are, terribly and terrifyingly normal.¹

Arendt's relegation of Eichmann from monster dripping with the blood of a people to the conformist clerk who does his job and does not ask questions suggests that crime and corrupt politics and murder all demand complicit and silent observers. Eichmann's crime was that he was no monster, no aberration from the norm.

What exactly is the comfort of making Eichmann or others like him into monsters? Monsters confirm that evil resides in specific bodies, particular psyches. Monstrosity as the bodily manifestation of evil makes evil into a local effect, not generalizable across a society or culture. But modernity has eliminated the comfort of monsters because we have seen, in Nazi Germany and elsewhere, that evil works often as a system, it works through institutions and it works as a *banal* (meaning "common to all") mechanism. In other words evil stretches across cultural and political productions as complicity and collaboration.

Modernity makes monstrosity a function of consent and a result of habit. Monsters of the nineteenth century—like Frankenstein, like Dracula—certainly still scare and chill but they scare us from a distance. We wear modern monsters like skin, they are us, they are on us and in us. Monstrosity no longer coagulates into a specific body, a single face, a unique feature, it is replaced with a banality that fractures resistance because the enemy becomes harder and harder to locate, and looks more and more like the hero. What were monsters are now facets of identity; the sexual other and the racial other cannot be separated from self. But still, we keep our monsters ready.

Horror lies just beneath the surface, it lurks in dark alleys, it hides behind a rational science, it buries itself in respectable bodies, so the story goes. In a postmodern horror movie, *The Silence of the Lambs* (1991) by Jonathan Demme, fear no longer assumes a depth/surface model; after this movie (but perhaps all along) horror resides at the level of skin itself. Skin is at once the most fragile of boundaries and the most stable of signifiers; it is the site of entry for the vampire, the signifier of race for the nineteenth-century monster; skin is precisely what does not fit, Frankenstein sutures his monster's ugly flesh together by binding it in a yellow skin, too tight and too thick. When, in the modern horror movie, terror rises to the surface, the surface itself becomes a complex web of pleasure and danger; the surface rises to the surface, the surface becomes Leatherface, becomes Demme's Buffalo Bill, and everything that rises must converge.

Demme's film weaves its horror and its pleasure around the remains of other horror films and literature. It quotes from Alfred Hitchcock's *Psycho*, from Brian De Palma's *Dressed To Kill*, from William Wyler's *The Collector* and it features a reincarnation of Bram Stoker's insane Renfield, the murderous idiot savant of *Dracula*. This film, indeed, has cannibalized its genre, consumed it bones and all and reproduced it in a slick and glossy representation of representations of violence, murder, mutilation, matricide and the perverse consequences of gender confusion. *The Silence of the Lambs* is precisely never silent, it hums with past voices, other stories; it holds the murmur of vampires, the outrage of the monster's articulations, the whispers of the beasts who were told but never got to tell. The viewer is now a listener, a listener to the narrative of the monster.

But, in *The Silence of the Lambs*, the monster is everywhere and everyone and the monster's story is not distinguishable from other textual productions validated within the film. *The Silence of the Lambs* skillfully pits Jodie Foster as FBI agent Clarice Starling against the charismatic intellect of ex-psychiatrist and serial murderer Dr. Hannibal "the Cannibal" Lecter played by Anthony Hopkins. Starling goes to visit Lecter in his maximum security cell in order to engage his help in tracking down a serial killer. The murderer has been nicknamed Buffalo Bill because he skins his female victims after murdering them.

Starling is no match for Lecter and he manipulates her by insisting upon “quid pro quo” or an equal exchange of information. In return for information about Buffalo Bill, Lecter demands that Starling tell him her nightmares, her most awful memories of childhood, her darkest fears. As she reveals her stories to Lecter’s scrutiny, Starling is forced to relinquish the authority invested in her position as detective. Suddenly, with only the glass separating the two, Starling seems no more free than Lecter; both are incarcerated by knowledge or lack of, by memory, by power structures, by violence, by the unnameable menace of Lecter the Intellecter.

Dr. Hannibal Lecter is considered an unusual threat to society not simply because he murders people and consumes them, but because as a psychiatrist he has access to minds. He is someone “you don’t want inside your head,” Starling’s boss warns her; of course you don’t want him inside your body either and you certainly don’t want to let him put you inside his! Boundaries between people (detective and criminal, men and women, murderers and victims) are all mixed up in this film until they disappear altogether, becoming as transparent as the glass that (barely) divides Lecter and Starling. Lecter illustrates to perfection the spooky and uncanny effect of confusing boundaries, inside and outside, consuming and being consumed, watching and being watched. He specializes in getting under one’s skin, into one’s thoughts and he makes little of the classic body/mind split as he eats bodies and sucks minds dry.

The subplot in *The Silence of the Lambs* involves the tracking of murderer-mutilator Buffalo Bill. Buffalo Bill, we find out, skins his victims because he suffers a kind of gender dysphoria that he thinks can be solved by covering himself in female skin; in fact, he is making himself a female body suit, or “a woman suit” as Starling puts it, and he murders simply to gather the necessary fabric. Buffalo Bill, of course, is no Lecter, no thinker, he is all body, but the wrong body. Lecter points out that Buffalo Bill hates identity, he is simply at odds with any identity whatsoever; no body, no gender will do and so he has to sit at home with his skins and fashion a completely new one. What he constructs is a posthuman gender; a gender beyond the body, beyond human, a carnage of identity.

Buffalo Bill symbolizes the problem of a kind of literal skin disease but all the other characters in the film are similarly, although not necessarily pathologically, discomforted. Skin, in this movie, creeps and crawls, it is the most fragile of covers and also the most sticky. Skin becomes a metaphor for surface, for the external; it is the place of pleasure and the site of pain, it is the thin sheet that masks bloody horror. But skin is also the movie screen, the destination of the gaze, the place that glows in the dark, the violated site of visual pleasure.

In a by now very influential article, Laura Mulvey writes “sadism demands a story.” “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,” of course, attempts to develop a theory of spectatorship that addresses itself to questions of who finds what pleasurable.² Such questions become all too pertinent when we consider that audiences change through history even as monsters do. Women were once the willing audience of the literature of horror, Gothic indeed was written for female consumers, but now women watch horror films, with reluctance and with fear, reluctant to engage with their everyday nightmares of rape and violation, fearful that the screen is only a mirror and that the monster may be sitting next to them as they watch. Films that feature sadistic murderers stalking unsuspecting female victims simply confirm a certain justified paranoia which means that women aren’t crazy to be paranoid about rape and murder but rather they are crazy not to be.

For the female spectator of the horror movie, pleasure has to do with identification. Do we identify, in other words, with the detective or the victim, with the murderer persecuted by his gender markings or with the disembodied intellect of the imprisoned psychiatrist? This film allows us the pleasure of many different identifications and refuses to reduce female to a mess of mutilated flesh. The woman detective or female dick alters traditional power relations and changes completely the usual trajectory

of the horror narrative. So does Dr. Hannibal Lecter when he refuses to answer Starling's questions until she has answered his. His story requires her story, and hers depends upon his. Each role in this narrative is now fraught with violence, with criminality, with textuality; no role is innocent, no mind is pure, no body impenetrable. Each role demands and produces a narrative, a text, about violence and evil, about the painful things people do to each other. Like the skin that Buffalo Bill attempts to suture into identity, stories in *The Silence of the Lambs* cover the nakedness of fear and fashion it into horror. The camera glances at mutilation and then frames it within more stories, more sadism, more silence. The silence of the lambs of course is no silence at all but rather a babble of voices fighting to be heard.

I resist, then, the temptation to submit Demme's film to a feminist analysis that would identify the danger of showing mass audiences an aestheticized version of the serial killing of women. I resist the temptation to brand the film as homophobic because gender confusion becomes the guilty secret of the mad man in the basement. I resist indeed the readings that want to puncture the surface and enter the misogynist and homophobic unconscious of Buffalo Bill, Hannibal the Cannibal and Clarice Starling. The film indeed demands that we stay at the surface and look for places where the surface stretches too thin. We cannot look to the ruptures to reveal the truth of pleasure or the pleasure of truth but we can look to the places where skin becomes transparent and see that nothing is hidden. Gender trouble, indeed, is not the movie's secret, it is a confession that both Starling and Buffalo Bill are all too willing to make.

And yet, the gender trouble that Buffalo Bill represents, as he prances around in a wig and plays with a poodle called Precious, cannot be simply dismissed. It seems to me that *The Silence of the Lambs* emphasizes that we are at a peculiar time in history, a time when it is becoming impossible to tell the difference between prejudice and its representations, between, then, homophobia and representations of homophobia. In the example of *The Silence of the Lambs*, I would agree with Hannibal Lecter's pronouncement that Buffalo Bill is not reducible to "homosexual," or "transsexual." He is indeed a man at odds with gender identity or sexual identity and his self-presentation is a confused mosaic of signifiers. In the basement scene he resembles a heavy metal rocker as much as a drag queen and that is precisely the point. He is a man imitating gender, exaggerating gender and finally attempting to shed his gender in favor of a new skin. Buffalo Bill is prey to the most virulent conditioning heterosexist culture has to offer. He believes that anatomy is destiny.

A film like *The Silence of the Lambs* creates disagreement not just between those who see it as homophobic and those who don't, but between the lesbian and heterosexual feminists who were thrilled to see a woman cast as a tough detective character, and the gay men who felt offended by Buffalo Bill. It also divides sentiment along gender lines: I think *The Silence of the Lambs* is a horror film that, for once, is not designed to scare women, it scares men instead with the image of a fragmented and fragile masculinity, a male body disowning the penis.

Buffalo Bill, we may recall, uses female skin to cover his pathological gender dysphoria. He is a seamstress, a collector of textiles and fabrics and an artist who fashions death into new life and in so doing he divorces sex from murder. This is a new kind of killer. Buffalo Bill is not interested in getting in women, he never rapes them, he simply wants to get them out of a skin that he perceives as the essence of female. Buffalo Bill reads his desire against his body and realizes that he has the wrong body, at least externally. He is a woman trapped in a man's skin but no transsexual. Hannibal's remark to Starling that this man is not a transsexual and not a homosexual suggests that if he were the first, Buffalo Bill would be simply confused about his genitals; if he were the second, he would be confused about an object choice. Neither is the case.

The "case" is precisely the problem and Buffalo Bill's case becomes Starling's as she tracks him to his sewing room. Buffalo Bill thinks he is not in the wrong body, but the wrong skin, an incorrect casing.

He is not interested in what lies beneath the skin for skin is gender for the murderer just as skin, or outward appearance, becomes the fetishized signifier of gender for a heterosexist culture. Buffalo Bill's sewing machine treats gender as an outfit made of natural fibers. Skin becomes the material which can be transformed by the right pattern into a seamless suit. But the violent harvest that precedes Buffalo Bill's domestic enterprise suggests that always behind the making of gender is a bloodied female body cut and measured to the right proportions.

And the case is also Hannibal the Cannibal's for he knows Buffalo Bill as a former case history and he knows what he is doing and why. Hannibal was once Buffalo Bill's psychiatrist, Buffalo Bill was once his case. Hannibal, however, created a monster as an inverted model of his own pathology. Inversion in this film depends upon two terms always and neither one can function as a norm. If homosexuality is an inversion of heterosexuality, this assumes that heterosexuality is the desired term. But in *The Silence of the Lambs* inversion reduces norm and pathology, inside and outside to meaningless categories: there is only pathology and varying degrees of it, only an outside in various forms. Buffalo Bill is an inversion of Hannibal the Cannibal, and Hannibal inverts his patient's desire because what Hannibal wants to put inside of himself, Buffalo Bill wants to dress in.

Buffalo Bill is Starling's case and when a new body is found in Clay County, West Virginia, Starling's home state, she flies home with her boss to conduct the autopsy. The corpse laid out on the table, of course, is a double for Starling, the image of what she might have become had she not left home, as Lecter points out, and aspired to greater things. This scene, in many ways, represents a premature climax of the horror in the movie. We see laid out for us exactly what it is that Buffalo Bill does to his victims. Prior to the autopsy, the camera has protected the viewer from close-ups of photographs taken of victims' bodies. Similarly, when Starling is being taken to Lecter, she is shown a photographic image of what Lecter did to a nurse. He attempted to bite her face off but the image of that hideous unmasking is kept hidden from the viewer. In the autopsy scene, the camera reveals all that it had promised to spare us: it lingers on the green and red flesh, the decayed body with two regular diamonds of flesh cut from its back.

The autopsy scene, indeed, resolves the drama of identification for the female spectator who found herself torn between detective and victim. After this scene the gaze is most definitely Starling's. The narrative has seemed to implicate Starling with the victim by identifying the two women in relation to their backgrounds and ages, and so there is some tension as Starling enters the morgue to begin the examination of the body. But Starling quickly establishes the difference between herself and the body in the body bag by setting herself up as an authority. She begins her visual analysis of the corpse and at first, as her voice trembles and her hands shake, as her body gives her away, the camera watches her from a position below the corpse—the spectator is positioned with the victim on the table. "What do you see, Starling?" asks Crawford. "She's not local," she replies, "her ears are pierced three times and there's glitter nail polish. Looks like town to me." Unlike Starling, then, the victim is not a hometown girl. The camera moves now to a position above the body and the gaze of the camera abruptly becomes Starling's gaze as we look down upon a mottled arm rotting and covered with dead leaves and other traces of the river she was hauled out of. Starling's examination of the corpse becomes more sure and the tension of identification between detective and victim is relieved for the moment.

Starling, like the viewer, seemed inclined to look away from the corpse, horrified perhaps by the nakedness of violence so plainly detailed before her. But, the corpse finally becomes object, thing, post-human when Starling looks at a photograph of its teeth and sees something in the throat. Before the photograph, her gaze, like our gaze, begins to linger. Turning back to the corpse moments later, Starling surveys the undignified flesh and speaking into a tape recorder, she begins to piece the body together, rebuild the mutilated body, and learn what the body has to tell.

The camera itself has done a kind of violence to whatever humanity remained upon or within the body—this is no longer a body framing an inner life, the body is merely surface, a picture. The camera has framed the victim in much the same way as Buffalo Bill does as he prepares his lambs for the slaughter. Keeping his victim naked in an old well shaft, he addresses her as “it” when he must talk to her. And the camera also enables Starling to turn the corpse into a case, a case that she must solve even as the victim has become a case that Buffalo Bill will wear. This hideous wake, then, foreshadows the scenes in Buffalo Bill’s basement gender factory and the autopsy becomes a site of trauma in terms of the film’s narrative about gender—the corpse is no woman, it has been degendered, it is postgender, skinned and fleshed, it has been reified, turned at last into a fiction of the body.

We know from what happened to Buffalo Bill that Hannibal’s patients go on to lead illustrious careers and so it is an ominous finale in the movie when Starling, Lecter’s fledgling patient and the FBI’s fledgling agent, steps up to accept her graduation certificate from the FBI: different degree, same profession—crime. As a camera captures her moment of graduation, the flash bulb is reminiscent of that earlier moment, that prior photograph of the victim’s teeth in the autopsy lab. As she becomes a “real” agent, Starling is framed as victim, as a lamb in wolf’s clothing. As if to capitalize on the decline of Starling’s authority, a phone call interrupts her graduation celebration. It is from the now escaped Hannibal; he tells her not to worry, he will not pursue her. Hannibal and Starling are both loose, both free, both out and about. The scene shows Hannibal on a Caribbean isle watching his psychiatrist from his prison days. Hannibal tells Starling, “I’m having an old friend for dinner,” and he adjusts his clothes elegantly. Hannibal is dressed to kill. Buffalo Bill, of course, kills to dress and only one costume will do.

Hannibal Lecter feeds upon both flesh and fiction. He needs Starling’s stories as much as he needs to track down his next victim. “Quid pro quo,” he tells Starling; he wants a fair rate of exchange. Hannibal demands that no one be innocent and Starling must have a story to match the story he will sell her. Starling’s story is a fiction of her power that is revealed in the process as no power at all but only the difference between two sides of the glass. Hannibal determines the limits of a carceral system. He is not disciplined by his imprisonment nor punished because as long as there are people around him he can cannibalize their stories. The ever hungry mind, Hannibal analyzes people to death. He whispers all night to the man in the cell next to him and by morning the man, Multiple Miggs, has swallowed his own tongue; Hannibal enacts murders through bars and cages, through minds. Prisons come in all shapes and sizes and while Hannibal’s is a restricted area equipped with a screen playing a TV evangelist at high volume, Starling is stuck inside her head, her body and the disturbing memories that Hannibal insists are not buried far beneath the power suit but quite present at the surface, on the top, visible and readable.

Starling’s narrative of her childhood flight from her aunt and uncle’s house becomes as terrifying as any other aspect of the horror narrative. The pieces of her past cohere slowly as Hannibal extracts each one surgically and then confronts her with it. The secret of her past that threatened all along to be some nasty story of incest or rape is precisely not sexual. Clarice Starling is the girl who wanted to save the lambs from the slaughter, who could only carry one at a time and who finally could not support the weight. Clarice Starling is the girl who freed the lambs from the pen and then watched in horror as they refused to leave it. Starling saves others in order to save her own skin.

Hannibal stays imprisoned until there is no longer a story to hear. The installments that Starling gave him of her life maintained his interest just as each new killing maintains the FBI’s interest in Buffalo Bill. The serial killing, indeed, like the psychoanalytic session, promises interminable chapters, promises to serialize, to keep one waiting for an ever deferred conclusion. Serial murders have something of a literary quality to them: they happen regularly over time and each new one creates

an expectation; they involve a plot, a consummate villain and an absolutely pure (because randomly picked) victim; they demand explanation; they demand that a pattern be forced onto what appears to be “desperately random” (as Hannibal Lecter tells Starling). “Sadism demands a story,” I noted earlier, quoting Mulvey. And, the story that sadism demands is the Gothic story embedded in the heart of a consumer culture *and* the realistic story embedded deep within Gothic culture. Lecter’s Gothic sadism demands Starling’s benign story, and Starling’s innocence demands the Gothic tale that she as much as Lecter chooses to tell about a series of “desperately random” killings.

Serial killings, like chapters in a periodical, stand in need of interpretation and interpreters (like the police, the tabloids, the public, the detective, the psychologist, the critic) produce the story that the bodies cannot tell. Starling and the FBI insist that there be a reason, a concrete explanation for the skinning of women, and Lecter complies but only as long as Starling recognizes that she also is complicit in the narrative, she too must tell and be told. Telling does not mean finding a story in the unconscious that fits, it means inventing the unconscious and inventing the unconscious so that it can lie well enough to keep up with the fiction of everyday life.

Like some monstrous parody of nineteenth century Gothic, these two characters mimic the vampire and Frankenstein’s monster. Franco Moretti describes Shelley’s monster and Stoker’s vampire as “dynamic, *totalizing*, monsters” who “threaten to live forever, and to conquer the world.”³ Buffalo Bill and Hannibal are also totalizing and each consumes other lives in order to prolong his own. Buffalo Bill combines in one both Frankenstein and the monster; he is the scientist, the creator and he is the body being formed and sculpted, stitched and fitted. Like Frankenstein, Buffalo Bill must search abroad for the body parts he needs and bring them back to the laboratory. The “filthy workshop of creation” is now a basement sweatshop and new material is stored in a well in the form of a woman who Buffalo Bill is starving out of her skin. Buffalo Bill, however, is pickier than his predecessor; he demands particular human remains, size 14 to be precise, no one size fits all.

“Is he a vampire,” a policeman asks Starling as she is on her way to pay Hannibal a final visit. “There’s no word for what he is,” she replies. Of course, he is a vampire, and a cannibal, a murderer and a psychopath. He is also a psychiatrist who drains minds before he starts on the bodies and perhaps he makes no distinction between the two. Hannibal is, Starling might have answered, a psychoanalyst, a doctor in the most uncanny of sciences. Freud predicted Hannibal when he noted in “The Uncanny”: “Indeed, I should not be surprised to hear that psycho-analysis, which is concerned with laying bare these hidden forces, has itself become uncanny to many people. . . .”⁴ Hannibal and Buffalo Bill play out the doctor/patient dynamic that has precisely become uncanny, homoerotic (heimoerotic), trans-ferential in the most literal way. Buffalo Bill leaves Hannibal his first victim, an ex-lover, in the form of a severed head. This is totem or taboo or something more than oedipal/edible. Not exactly father and son, certainly not a professional relationship, the two “monsters” bond in the business of death and divorce death once and for all from sexuality. Murder is no romance in *The Silence of the Lambs*, it is a lesson in home economics—eating and sewing.

Hannibal the Cannibal and Buffalo Bill are Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde as much as they are Dracula and Frankenstein. Jekyll, of course, produced Hyde from within his own psyche and he cannibalizes him when the pressure is on. Hyde is an incredibly close relative to Buffalo Bill—he too is “hide-bound,” trapped in his skin, hidden by his hide, hiding from the law.⁵ Like Buffalo Bill, Hyde performs his ritualistic crimes for his other half; he murders for Jekyll, he carouses for Jekyll, he indulges perverse desire for Jekyll. The homoerotic dyad bound to one body, hiding one self in the other, allows one self to feed off the others’ strengths and weaknesses. No longer homosexuals, they are simply victims of modern science: psychiatry, a mind fuck.

Criticism has psychologized horror, made it a universal sign of humanity or depravity: horror,

supposedly, is what we *all* fear in our oedipal unconscious. It is archetypal and yet individual, a condition of language or separation from the mother, a fragmentation or unspeakable desire. Now, in *The Silence of the Lambs*, horror is psychology, a bad therapeutic relationship, a fine romance between the one who knows and the one who eats, the one who eats and the one who grows skins; the one who castrates and the one who enacts a parody of circumcision. Psychology is no longer an explanation for horror, it generates horror, it founds its most basic fantasies and demands their enactment in the name of transference and truth.

It is no surprise that psychoanalysis and cinema have replaced fiction as the privileged locus of the horror/pleasure thrill. Psychoanalysis, writes Foucault, is “both a theory of the essential relatedness of the law and desire, and a technique for relieving the effects of the taboo where its rigor makes it pathenogenic.”⁶ Psychoanalysis uncovers and prohibits and in its prohibition lies the seeds of a desire. The moment of uncovering, of course, the moment when the skin is drawn back, the secrets of the flesh exposed, that moment is cinematic in its linking of seeing and knowing, vision and pleasure, power and punishment. The making visible of bodies, sex, power and desire provokes a new monstrosity and dares the body to continue its striptease down to the bone. Hannibal Lecter elicits Starling’s poor little flashbacks only to demonstrate that stripping the mind is no less a violation than stripping the body and that mind and body are no longer split: Starling’s memories are peeled back even as Buffalo Bill prepares his next lamb for the slaughter; and the raw nerve of Starling’s memory is as exposed as the corpse that she dissected.

As a curious trademark, Buffalo Bill leaves a cocoon of the Death Head Moth in his victims’ throats after he has killed them. Starling first finds one of the cocoons during the postmortem when she notices something is lodged in the corpse’s throat. Later, we discover that Buffalo Bill collects butterflies and hatches moth cocoons. While the skull and crossbones markings on the moth are an obvious standard of the horror genre, the cocoon and the moth symbolize Buffalo Bill’s particular pathology. Buffalo Bill and his victims are both cocoon and moth, larva and imago. Buffalo Bill is the cocoon holed up in a basement waiting for his skin to grow, for his beautiful metamorphosis to take place, and he is the moth that lives and breeds in clothes. Lecter calls Buffalo Bill’s crime “transformation”—he knows that Buffalo Bill is waiting in the dark for his beautiful gender suit to grow.

Buffalo Bill’s victims are also cocoon and moth, they must shed their skins and fly on to death. Or, they are the moths, the producers of material. By placing the cocoon in his victims’ throats, Buffalo Bill marks the difference between moth and larvae, outside and inside as no difference at all. The cocoon is inside the victims and the victims have shed their cocoons, the covering is internal and outside there is nothing but raw flesh. The blocked throat, of course, symbolizes the silence of the lambs to the slaughter. A woman who has been reduced to a size 14 skin has no voice, no noise coming from inside to be heard outside. The voice, “the grain of the voice,” is the last signifier of something internal to the body.

But Hannibal too attempts a transformation. In order to escape from his prison cell, Hannibal murders two police men. He cuts the face off one of them and covers himself with it and dresses in his clothes. When help arrives, Hannibal is taken out of the facility on a stretcher. By draping the bloody face over his own, Hannibal tears a leaf out of Buffalo Bill’s casebook. Identity again proves to be only skin deep, and freedom depends upon appropriate dress. But even when he was in the cage, Hannibal was not bound by his chains, indeed he seemed only to be there because he wanted to be, because he wanted to hear the end of Starling’s story. Sitting calmly behind the bars, his hands on his knees, his mouth open, the story of Starling’s personal horror issuing from his lips, Hannibal resembles a Francis Bacon “Face.” His features are blurred, his flesh resembles meat and his mouth, open to tell, forms the image of a scream that is felt not heard. But another Bacon painting also provides a fitting

backdrop to this baconesque film. His “Figure with Meat” blurs human flesh into animal flesh and makes the slaughterhouse a central image of human cruelty. The abattoir, of course, was at the center of Starling’s childhood nightmare and it becomes the setting for Buffalo Bill’s sartorial activities. The figure with meat, in this narrative, is Starling but also Lecter and Buffalo Bill. The horrific human figure sits framed by the dripping flesh of what he will eat, a skinned animal with a recyclable hide, a carcass no longer worth saving.

Like the mythical moth that flutters too close to the flame, Buffalo Bill both covets and fears light. He keeps himself entrapped in the darkness and stalks his victims by night using infrared glasses. Like Buffalo Bill, the viewer of *The Silence of the Lambs* can also see in the dark. In the climatic hunting scene towards the end of the film, when Buffalo Bill plays hide and seek with Clarice Starling, the spectator watches through Buffalo Bill’s eyes. Clarice’s clarity deserts her and again, as she was in relation to Hannibal Lecter, Clarice is reduced to a listener. We see Clarice stumbling around through the infrared of Buffalo Bill’s bloody vision. But even as we see with Buffalo Bill, it would not be accurate to say we, as spectators, are simply identified with his murderous gaze. We are in fact divided between the gaze of the camera that frames its object (here it is Starling) into still life or thingness and Starling’s blindness that manages to direct a gun straight at the camera. Starling has been framed and blinded—but blindness (like silence) has a power all its own. To be blind is to avoid being trapped by appearance, it confers the freedom to look back.⁷ Her shot in the dark hits Buffalo Bill and blows out a window, letting the light in. Starling has not only returned the gaze she has destroyed it and remade it.

As a final point of contact with posthuman gender and the cinematic gaze, I want to examine one more manifestation of transformation in the film. Starling traces her clues to the house of the first murder victim and she goes into the victim’s bedroom that has been kept exactly as Frederika left it. The camera looks over Starling’s shoulder as she picks over the dead woman’s belongings—a jewelry box, a romance novel called *Silken Threads*, a diet book. The room is decorated with butterfly wallpaper, a tailor’s dummy and in the closet hangs material with paper diamonds pinned to it, ready to cut out. In Frederika’s room, Starling finally realizes Buffalo Bill’s sartorial pathology. Later, in Buffalo Bill’s basement, the camera again lingers upon the signifiers of the crime—textiles, threads, needles, cocoons, a sewing machine and tailor’s dummies. The two rooms are collapsed into one momentarily as the next victim’s screams bleed through from the cellar. Buffalo Bill, of course, has become Frederika just as Frederika has become Buffalo Bill—he wears her, she is upon him, he is inside her. Victim and murderer are folded into each other as Starling enters gun in hand to attempt to fix boundaries once and for all.

Buffalo Bill’s misidentify forced him to assume what we might call a posthuman gender. He divorces once and for all sex and gender or nature and gender and remakes the human condition as a posthuman body suit. Buffalo Bill kills for his clothes and emblamatizes the ways in which gender is always posthuman, always a sewing job which stitches identity into a body bag. Skin, in this film, is identity itself rather than the surface of an interior identity. Buffalo Bill, in other words, is a limit case for gender, for identity, for humanness. He does not understand gender as inherent, innate; he reads it only as a surface effect, a representation, an external attribute engineered into identity. Buffalo Bill is at odds with identity because he is willing to kill to get one, he commits violent acts in order to stabilize his condition. While we are repelled by Buffalo Bill for what he does to women, while the female spectator must ultimately look away from his experimentation, nonetheless Buffalo Bill represents a subtle change in the representation of gender. Not simply murderer-monster, Buffalo Bill challenges the heterosexist and misogynist constructions of the humanness, the naturalness, the interiority of gender even as he is victimized by them. He rips gender apart and remakes it as a mask, a suit, a costume. Gender identity for Buffalo Bill is not the transcendent signifier of humanity, it is its most efficient technology.

Hannibal Lecter, with his own masks and dissemblings, is the image of a violence that cannot be kept in a cage; he is not evil incarnate, but a representation of the evil that spreads across discourse, sound and sense; across people, bodies and minds; across behaviors, actions and passivities; across systems, bureaucracies and institutions. Monstrosity in *The Silence of the Lambs* in fact is an effect of the surface, a ripple across fields of criminality, surveillance and discipline. Monstrosity, in this film, cannot be limited to a body, even a body that kills in order to clothe itself, or a body that cannibalizes in order to feed. Monstrosity is now a disembodied and disembodying force, reduced to silence, to blindness, to surface.

Horror is the relation between carcass and history, between flesh and fiction. The destruction of the boundary between inside and outside that I have traced here marks a historical shift. *The Silence of the Lambs* equates history with cannibalism; aesthetic production with a sacralized meal, Gothic horror with the abject form of that cannibalism leaving the body. *The Silence of the Lambs* has cannibalized nineteenth-century Gothic, eaten its monsters alive and thrown them up onto the screen. The undead, the monsters who threaten to live forever find eternal life in the circularity of consumption and production that characterizes Hollywood cinema.

NOTES

1. Hannah Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem* (New York: Penguin Books, 1963) 276.
2. See Laura Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," *Screen* 16.3 (Autumn 1975): 14.
3. Franco Moretti, *Signs Taken For Wonder: Essays in the Sociology of Literary Forms*, trans. Susan Fischer, David Forgacs and David Miller (London: Verso, 1983) 84–5.
4. Sigmund Freud, "The Uncanny" (1919) in *On Creativity and the Unconscious*, intro. Benjamin Nelson (New York and London: Harper and Row, 1958) 151.
5. In the novel *The Silence of the Lambs* by Thomas Harris (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1988), Buffalo Bill works for a leather company called Mr. Hide.
6. Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality I: An Introduction*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Vintage Books, 1980) 129.
7. As an interesting note on the theme of blindness as a fear blocker, in another film made from a Thomas Harris novel, *Manhunter* (1988), the female would-be victim is also blind and her blindness also aids her in her escape from a murderer. In this film, the murderer's predilection is to take posed photographs of his victims after he has killed them. He works in a dark room developing film, furthermore, and this is where he meets the blind woman. Obviously, Harris is making connections between vision and the production of horror—what you cannot see will not hurt you seems to be the message, and the dark is always to the woman's advantage. This may be read as a kind of postmodern rewriting of the feminist slogan "take back the night."

